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As We See It: CAFTA Is an Opportunity

DEMOCRATS: There's a big change in the Democratic party's position over free trade. A Democratic friend of ours told us more than a decade ago that his party would end up ruling America for years to come because it was about to embrace the mainstream. These words were said to us in the aftermath of Newt Gingrich's ill-fated "Contract With America" and the high level of dissatisfaction with the newly elected Republican Congress that had swept into power in 1994.

For a while, we believed our friend, because the Democratic party seemed to be under the clever and inclusive leadership of President Bill Clinton.

It's worth remembering that Clinton — especially prior to his legal troubles and the conflict over his affair with Monica Lewinsky — perhaps was quite successful in winning over mainstream Democrats and Republicans.

Sure, he gave solidly liberal speeches to his supporters, but he governed on both sides of the political aisle. He was the one who signed and supported welfare reform, for example. And he also embraced the free-trade proposal known as NAFTA — the North American Free Trade Agreement.

NAFTA, of course, quickly won the scorn of a variety of naysayers from both political parties — and famously from the independent party of Ross Perot. But it did win, thanks to support from reasonable leaders in both parties.

As a result, Perot's so-called "giant sucking sound" of jobs leaving the country never happened. Yes, some jobs have been lost, and they've been documented. Less documented are the new jobs created, and less documented are those in Mexico whose lot in life has been improved by knocking down trade barriers.

Today, an expansion of the agreement is being proposed by President Bush, under the name of CAFTA, the Central America Free Trade Agreement.

But this time, Democrats aren't signing on. Back in 1993, more than 100 Democrats voted in favor of the proposal in the House of representatives, and a recent article in The Washington Post predicts that fewer than 10 will vote that way for CAFTA.

We understand those who worry over the lowering of trade barriers. Any such policy has winners and losers, and you can bet that labor unions and others can find examples of those whose lot in life is worse after a free-trade agreement.

But in the world economy — which is a fact of life whether we pass free-trade agreements or not — the United States is at a disadvantage if it's not part of new trade pacts. The awakening Asian giant of China is now a major player in global trade, and the

United States had better line up its trade partners and suppliers if indeed it wants its economy to move forward.

CAFTA is good policy, as Clinton believed about NAFTA back during his presidency. Yet some core Democratic groups, such as labor unions and environmental groups, are putting pressure on the party to back away. In a climate of increasingly polarized issues, the Democrats are taking care of their base.

But as Republicans are moving to the right over social issues, it's hardly the time for Democrats to move back to the left. We still see the great American middle open and available for whichever major party wants it.

We hope that Bush and his party prevail in the CAFTA debate. And we'd like to see one of the parties — either one — experiment with governing from the middle. It might work wonders.